

Recreation area pitched along canal

C&D's banks could become regional attraction, backers say

By MIKE BILLINGTON

Staff reporter
5-8-2004

It is a manmade water route that splits Delaware in two, but under a proposal announced Friday the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal also could become a major recreational outlet and tourist attraction.

"The first stage of the proposal is a study to determine the cost and feasibility of making the canal and the land along its banks more easily accessible for hikers, bikers, runners, birders, painters, photographers and people who want to fish," said Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del.

Castle requested \$150,000 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to help the state pay for the study.

"The Chesapeake and Delaware Canal is an untapped recreational and educational resource for Delawareans, Marylanders, and the entire mid-Atlantic region," Castle said Friday at a news conference at the Reedy Point Bridge near Delaware City.

The proposal has the backing of key environmental groups as well as many of the people who live near the canal.

"This is, indeed, a great thing," said Tim Plemmons, executive director of

FEASIBILITY

Although the proposal is supported by several lawmakers, including Rep. Mike Castle (right), the cost of the project may be problematic. The cost of building a multi-use trail along one side of the 13-mile canal is estimated to be \$2.6 million. Castle wants \$150,000 for a study.



Delaware Greenways.

"It's certainly an exciting idea," said Erik Dressler, a St. Georges resident who helped lead a grass-roots campaign to save the landmark St. Georges Bridge that spans the canal. "Of course, it means that we're now going to have to share what has always been our little secret, but that's all right because it truly is an untapped resource."

The canal is the only commercial waterway built in the 1800s that is still in use. It is owned and operated by the Corps of Engineers and carries 40 percent of all ship traffic in and out of the Port of Baltimore, according to a corps Web site.

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Although they did not attend the briefing, U.S. Sens. Tom Carper and Joe Biden also endorsed the proposal Friday.

"I hope the study will lead to better management of this national resource," Carper said.

"The canal is a unique resource," Biden said. "Our goal should be to make it a place for as many people as possible to enjoy."

The proposal faces some challenges, officials said. One is the potential cost of the project. Plemmons said that it costs about \$200,000 a mile to build a trail for hikers, bikers, runners and walkers. That pushes the cost for improving the 13-mile C&D Canal to about \$2.6 million.

"And that cost could go higher if you want to really do it up right with interactive

displays and a visitor center," Plemmons said.

Dressler also noted that the cost of providing security could go up. The canal's banks are, he said, "pretty wild right now, and there isn't a huge law enforcement presence there. If you're going to get mom, pop and the kids out there on a Sunday afternoon, there will have to be a bigger law enforcement presence."

Still, they said, the benefits can far outweigh the costs.

"If this is handled properly the canal could easily become a regional attraction," Plemmons said. "It can contribute to health and physical fitness, and help with the revitalization efforts in Delaware City and St. Georges."

Reach Mike Billington at 324-2761 or mbillington@delawareonline.com.